



Chirag Shah, Employee Benefits Attorney and Community Activist

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At a young age, Chirag Shah decided that the law was for him. His successful career has proven him right, as he has found in the law both a job he loves and a way to get actively involved in issues he considers important.

Many people espouse dreams at the age of fourteen about what the future holds. Few realize exactly what they want at such a young age and then grow to live out those dreams and pursue that career. Chirag Shah did just that. At the age of fourteen, he knew he wanted to be a lawyer, and through the indecision of adolescence to the wandering intellectual eye of college, Chirag never wavered in his decision to use the law as a means to both earn a living and involve himself in civic activities.

Today, Chirag is developing a successful employee benefits practice with Wohlner Kaplon Phillips Young and Culter in Sherman Oaks, California doing exactly what he loves, practicing in ERISA and employee benefits law, with a touch of social activism and plenty of community involvement. Named one of the best lawyers under 40 by the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association in November 2003, and deemed one of the "Rising Young Stars: Top Asian-Pacific American Lawyers" in American Corporate Counsel magazine, Chirag represents a quiet persistence and dedication to the practice of law and its role as a civic profession. He presents a rare breed of attorney, who claims that he "loves everything about practicing law." We spoke with Chirag to ask him about his many accomplishments at a young age, his involvement in the Asian American legal community and to reflect upon practicing law and generally living a rewarding life while maintaining a successful career in law.

Q: You said you decided to become a lawyer at the age of fourteen, how did that happen?

A: Both my parents were lawyers, but believe it or not that is not why I decided to be an

attorney. I am sure my father and mother had an influence on me and I had great respect for my father, who was a public interest attorney for the first 14 years of my life and then became corporate counsel to a large textile company in India. Personally, I wanted a career that was intellectually stimulating, that allowed me access to different types of people and situations and utilized analytical abilities. I am sure having a picture into law practice had an influence, but I remember as clear as day, that one day I woke up and I knew law was the career that would allow me all those things and I have been dedicated to the field ever since. I started reading about the law at a young age, then narrowly focused on law school in college and finally ended up at law school at Northeastern in Boston.

Q: So you were born in India?

A: I was born in Ahmedabad, India, where my father was a poverty and human rights lawyer, and I immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve. I think growing up in various countries allowed me to really question barriers among people caused by religions, cultures and borders. It greatly influenced my development as an individual and an attorney.

Q: What have been some of the highlights of your career?

A: I worked with the Department of Justice through the IRS Office of Chief Counsel, in Washington, D.C. where I was assigned to a major reverse discrimination class action law suit. I mean, this was a massive case- even The White House was involved in it, with a class of tens of thousands of plaintiffs, I

think it was estimated to be around 92,000 at one point. I got to work with legendary DOJ and IRS lawyers during that time and really enjoyed the experience as an energetic young, idealist lawyer. During that time, I was getting my LL.M. in labor, employment and employee benefits law at Georgetown, which was also highly rewarding. After that I went in to private practice with the law firm of Gray Cary Ware & Freidenrich, in Palo Alto, CA right around the big dot.com boom. I got a chance to work for clients like Adobe, Agilent and others and really be involved in some interesting work with startups in Silicon Valley. Currently I am building an employee benefits practice with Wohlner Kaplon Phillips Young Cutler, and find it challenging and enjoyable.

My most memorable experiences during law school? Well, I worked as teaching assistant to Michael Dukakis, former Massachusetts governor and 1988 Democratic presidential nominee at Northeastern law school, in an innovative new course on economic development in the community. I also served as judicial extern to Associate Justice Roderick L. Ireland, who sits on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. They were such great experiences that for the last ten years or so, I've claimed both Justice Ireland and Former Governor Dukakis as mentors.

Q: What do you consider your most important professional accomplishment?

A: I'd like to divide this answer into two, my most professionally enlightening experience, and my most important professional accomplishment.



I think teaching the class with Michael Dukakis was very interesting and a great learning experience. It was a brand new course, we had 36 students who were divided into groups of 16, then sent out into the community to learn about some segment of economic development and draft position papers.

Winning the National Asian Pacific Bar Association's Top Lawyers Under 40 award was probably the most prestigious honor, and a great accomplishment because it was so unexpected. I was nominated by the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Los Angeles County and the South Asian Bar Association of Southern California. Even upon being nominated I did not think I would win, these awards were generally the prowess of attorneys from Ivy League schools with much bigger credentials. When I won, I was completely taken by surprise and very honored to be considered among the cream of Asian American attorneys.

Q: Would you like to talk a little bit about the South Asian Bar Association?

A: Sure, South Asian Bar Association of Southern California or SABA, was formed about seven years ago. It's a voluntary bar association designed to promote networking and contribute to the legal community. I think what makes this group unique is the fact that it encompasses an up-and-coming legal community, that is growing pretty rapidly and provides a great opportunity for South Asian lawyers to make their mark in the legal field.

My position at SABA is the co-chair for the Public Policy Committee, which looks at important policy issues that affect not only the South Asian community but the society in general. A couple of years ago, I helped draft a national position paper on the USA Patriot Act; last year we joined an amicus brief before the Supreme Court in the University of Michigan case in support of affirmative action; and then we worked hard with community groups and bar associations

to defeat Ward Connerly's Proposition 54, which was otherwise known as the "racial privacy initiative." Prop. 54 was a measure which was way too premature in time; it was very important for me to be involved in its opposition. In addition, I try to mentor law students and new attorney SABA members.

Last year, we formed a national organization of South Asian attorneys and are having our Inaugural National Conference in a few weeks. The national organization is called the National South Asian Bar Association and is made of local SABA chapters throughout the country. Our intention is to continue building on the relationships that we have formed with other bar associations, such as the American Bar Association and the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, because we indeed have much in common with those bar associations-in fact, most of our members also belong to both the ABA and the NAPABA, among other bar associations. The goal with NASABA is to bring together South Asian American attorneys and provide another launching pad for networking and business development, and of course community service. The Conference, which will take place from June 18-20 in Santa Monica, is themed "Oneness: Uniting South Asian Lawyers Across North America." As Chair of Marketing and Public Relations for the Inaugural National Conference, I'm proud to claim credit for this year's theme of oneness and unity; I'm also proud to say that one of my two mentors, Michael Dukakis, will be our keynote speaker for this historic, groundbreaking event.

Q: So, what exactly do you enjoy about being a lawyer?

A: I enjoy everything about practicing law. I hear only about 10% of lawyers enjoy practicing law and feel that I was very lucky to find what I love at an early age. My practice area is very interesting, I love doing employee benefits law. There is always new legislation/regulation and case law to keep abreast of, and there is a vast area to

explore. I think my field really provides me with a window to the world, I meet interesting people and always feel intellectually stimulated and challenged. I truly believe that law can be both a personally and financially rewarding career.

Q: Well since you serve as mentor, you must have some great advice for up-and-coming legal professionals, especially regarding your practice area.

A: As a new attorney these days, you have access to so many practice areas, its important to identify what works for you. Its hard to know before you have practiced what you want, so its important to keep an open mind and align with an organization, be it a firm or a public interest group that gives you opportunities to try out various practice areas. It is imperative that you are honest to yourself; you put in quality work everyday. I also think its important for lawyers to do community service, public service and networking. I think the best advice I got before starting my law career was from Justice Ireland. He always encouraged me to do public and community service from the beginning. He said that whatever you put into the service of others will come back to you ten times over. I've tried to live by that thinking from the first day that I graduated law school and its proven to be true for me one hundred percent. In the end, I think community service is just as important as the bread and butter aspect of practicing law. Success is really the combination of hard work and luck; you just have to acknowledge that and be grateful for it-by helping others along the way.

Practically speaking, for young attorneys, there is no substitute for doing quality, good work; hard work and networking are invaluable to a rewarding law career.

Q: Any hobbies?

A: I enjoy politics, movies, reading and theatre.



Q: Theatre?

A: Well I sit on the board of a theatre company called East West Players-which incidentally has been referred to by the New York Times as the "nation's premier Asian American theater troupe"- it's a total privilege, and an opportunity to indulge my creative side and get away from the cerebral pursuits of law practice. It's a great opportunity to be out in the artistic community, and a first-rate staff and board members serve it. The goal of East West Players is to give Asian and other artists an opportunity to showcase their talents while producing performances, which are second to none-thanks in large part to Tim Dang, our brilliant Producing Artistic Director.

You know, 54% of East West Players' membership is non-Asian, so it has a very

broad appeal. Currently, we are getting ready for the opening of David Henry Hwang's M. BUTTERFLY, which opens on June 9, and are working on a collaboration with the Cornerstone Theater Company on a play written by Shishir Kurup called AS VISHNU DREAMS, which will premiere in November. It explores the interplay between traditional Hinduism and modernity. We expect both productions to be super-successes.

Q: Favorite Reads?

A: Right now, I'm reading "Plan of Attack" by Bob Woodward.

Q: Family?

A: I have my mom and dad who I admire greatly, and tons of cousins. I am an only child, so no siblings.

Q: Plans for summer vacation?

A: No major plans for a vacation for the next six months, mainly I will be spending the summer developing my employee benefits practice.

Q: Any closing statement?

A: I guess I would reiterate the importance of community service and networking, of aligning oneself with issues one feels strongly about and about doing what one loves. Law is a public profession and activism and community service are indispensable to the successful practice of law.